press your tired hands against my lips darling

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press your tired hands against my lips darling

by Swifty_Fox

Summary

John had grown up poor and loved and knew how to give it out. Buck had been raised poor and hated and all he knew was how to lap it up like a stray dog. He'd bitten many a hand that had fed him but not John's, never John's

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Alternate cockpit conversation to episode 9

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

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Buck's never run from anything in his life. Schoolyard fights and drunken brawls, an angry father with heavy fists and a hundred-fucking-thousand German Luffwafe. He's never run in his goddamn life.

He runs now; runs like he's never run before. Heel to toe, legs extending to eat up every possible centimeter of ground. Bullets burrow into the frozen mud around him, kicking up ice and splinters of wood that bite into his ankles until blood runs hot and wet into his worn canvas boots. Every breath hurts, lungs raw from the cold, from exhaustion of their bloody march through the snow, from malnutrition. From guilt.

Bill and Neithammer weave through the trees with him. No Bucky. Because Buck had left him behind. Ran when he was told and abandoned John to the wolves. What a good soldier following orders he was.

Get going. I'm right behind you.

Any one of those shots could be a bullet in Bucky's skull.

Go Buck. Get out of here.

Buck runs.

-*~*-

Sixteen months.

Even though the men had been able to keep a rough track of their time in captivity, either from information via new POW's, from the guards, or from their own estimations, the SS guards had done their best to keep them in the dark. It was sobering. Buck had missed the entire goddamn war. By the time he makes it back there are no more combat missions to be flown, no daring rescues to be made of his comrades left behind at Stalag VII.

Buck is stuck making supply drops to starving civilians. It's good work, *honorable* work. The sort of good he had come over here to do.

John was still missing and even Gale's status as Major opened no doorways into intelligence on whether his friend was liberated, either through rescue or death. He cared about the others too, about DiMarco and Jefferson, Hambone and Crank and Bubs. But it was Bucky Gale thought of when he lay awake at night, warm and fed and safer than he had been in a year. All things that Bucky was not and it was Bucky who had been breaking, not him. Bucky who Gale had to pull back time and time again from the edge. John was a good man, a brave man; nobody blamed him for how he was falling apart against captivity

There was no one now to watch his friends back, to hold him together. Not in the ways he could.

It could have just as easily been their roles reversed, Buck taking the fall for Bucky but damn him he hated himself for running all the same. Freedom or death had been the choice but maybe surviving was worse in its own way.

Buck learns to fly with a new crew. He learns to remember that John isnt over the radio, isn't in the B-17 next to him in formation. He stops looking for him when he lands, no longer expects to find him at his side at mess and at the local pub. Buck and Bucky become Just Buck. And it's alright in a way; or that's what Gale tells himself. He'd had few friends growing up despite his charm and easy looks. A violent father and runaway mother left him with plenty of reasons to avoid closeness with other human beings. Rumors on one side about his mothers loose habits and awkward looks on the other from those who knew shouting wasn't the only thing happening in the Cleven home. Not with Bucky though, who was cocky in a fake sort of way and brash in a very real sort. Who talked when Buck was silent, gambled while Buck abstained, danced and sang while his blonde comrade watched from the sidelines. Bucky who took the simple prank of a name and turned it into a friendship. After a lifetime of solitude Gale misses his companion with an ache that borders on nausea.

Sometimes he imagines mounting his own rescue mission. He knows the approximate location of the camp, knows all it would take was a slight veer off course of a bomber during the next relief mission and he'd come swooping in like a hero that saves the day. In a fantasy where a single B-17 could take a camp full of guards, in a fantasy where there is a zero chance that John is buried in an unmarked shallow grave in some destroyed German village, a bullet rattling around in his brash brave skull.

When Bucky's voice comes over the comms, Buck feels like he leaves his stomach somewhere a hundred miles behind the bomber. Rosie's next to him and the crew over the radio so he composes himself, brushes off the emotions with swaggering bravado and a casual greeting. He sees him driving alongside the bomber, dangerously recklessly close and beaming. Gale had lost his smile somewhere in captivity but he feels one stretch its sore unused way across his face now.

And then they're face-to-face on the hot tarmac, Buck in his flight gear and Bucky in his leather jacket stained and dirty but alive, *alive* . Not captured, not dead in a ditch, his body a mass of rot and wasted humanity. They shake hands, a paltry reception compared to the river

of feeling coursing through Gale. He opens his mouth to say- something, anything. But there are others just as eager to welcome Major John Egan home and now is not the time nor the place for Buck to be sentimental.

You heard me the first goddamned time, Gale .

They were the grandest words Buck had ever heard.

-*~*-

The cockpit of the B-17 is as familiar as a childhood cradle at this stage. Buck hauls himself into the left seat - always the left seat - with a gentle clap to Bucky's shoulder.

For the first time since both their returns they are all alone. Buck and Bucky, just like how it started.

"You ready to go home?" he asks, grin crooked and maybe a little bit plastered on. Nobody quite believed it was over, that home was a possibility and not just a dream. Sometimes it felt like home no longer existed, that there was no other world but this run down airfield and German cities waiting to be chewed up by man-made instruments of war.

Bucky smiles back and Gale aches with the realness of him. The other man had not yet gained back the weight he had lost, trauma sitting smugly in the hollows of his cheekbones and eyes. His jacket fit him looser than it once had and his dark brown locks, once thick and well groomed, were shaved tight to his skull. Lice had been rampant amongst the prisoners and a full buzz was the most effective treatment. Buck's own gold waves were just getting long enough to flop over his forehead once again. Hair he'd grown to resent when they'd paired a bit too well with his blue eyes. The lingering looks of

approval from the enemy officers had been frequent and well beyond unwelcome.

There were things no man wanted to tell of his time in captivity. Buck had plenty. And German officers convinced he was the perfect specimen of Aryan superiority beyond his nationality was perhaps the mildest of them.

John's infamous mustache was gone too, making him young and coltish in appearance, brown eyes too big in his face and haunted in a way he refused to let slip in less familiar company. But this was Buck and Bucky. John and Gale. Now he stares haunted out the cockpit, jaw working as the smile fades from his face. He was so skinny. Buck knew he'd had a couple months on his comrade to regain lost fat and muscle but the difference between them was suddenly striking, sobering. John looked eaten from the inside out by rage and exhaustion.

"You ready to see Marge?"

The question shouldn't be pointed, but everything from John's mouth had seemed angry for so long it made something twist in Buck's gut.

Buck tries to say something, throat dry and stomach twisted. There were a million and one things Buck and John knew about each other. They could finish one another's sentences, order each other's drinks and a game of cards between them was sure to end in a stalemate every time. There were some things never shared between the two men. He manages some sort of noise that feels embarrassingly far from positive.

Bucky breaks into a hoarse laugh and Buck joins simply because if this was the only intimacy he could share with his co-pilot he would take it.

“I’ll bet,” John says and it’s infinitely fond. Fonder than anyone had ever addressed young Buck.

And that was the crux of it wasn’t it? John had grown up poor and loved and knew how to give it out. Buck had been raised poor and hated and all he knew was how to lap it up like a stray dog. He’d bitten many a hand that had fed him but not John’s, never John’s. Hands pockmarked and scarred and still riddled with splinters from scaling that flagpole.

“It’s more of a lavender situation,” Buck says as their laughter dies. It’s a shot in the dark. That John will understand, that John will stay seated in this plane with him.

Silence stretches and Gale breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth, strokes his fingers over the leather-wrapped grip of the steering, thumb brushing the flat top and down over the ridges of leather. Outside the world moves on, the base never still and silent like a man-powered anthill. But here, protected by metal and inches thick glass it was just them and their breaths and a vague admission that could take all they had suffered and shared the last few years and erase it.

Gale dares a look over. John’s eyes are darting back and forth as he stares out the front glass. Begging for his life is not something that would ever occur to Gale, but right now he feels ready to plead for a single response from John.

“Pretty selfish of you there Buck, taking an eligible young woman like Marge away from the adoring ladies.”

The ice in his lungs crack and Gale barks out a laugh, brushing a hand

through his hair. Relief flashes through him cold and then burning hot. He wants to ask, ask if it's okay, if John hates him; if John feels the same. Wants to know if John had sensed it in him the same way some of the guards had. Could he smell it on the pretty boy from South Dakota who found the perfect woman back in the States and used her to shield any prying questions about his empty bed over in England. Couldn't explain how he'd known what he was for a long time, could remember the first man's cock he took into his mouth, into his body and knew this was him. No woman would ever do. He doesn't have to speak, John saves him the decision.

"Form 1A?"

"Checked." *I thought I'd never see you again.*

"Controls and seats?"

"Check." *Leaving you behind was the most cowardly thing I've ever done.*

"Fuel transfer valves and switch?"

"Off." *I can't go home, John. I don't think I know how to be a person without you anymore. Everyone is dead and it's just us now, it can only ever be us.*

The cockpit falls into silence, Gale wishing he were a woman for a spare second. That he could love John. That he could weep for his friend's return, weep for his pain and his hurt. Neither of those things were meant for men like him.

"Leaving a lot of good men behind."

John's voice is calm, distant and dazed but when Gale looks over the other man is half turned, facing out the side view. The glare of the setting sun obscures any reflection that might be there to gauge his friend's expression.

“Yeah,” Gale says softly, “ John-”

His co-pilots body convulses, curling inwards under an unseen violent force. Gale grips the man's shoulder, pulling John into an upright position and looking him over for injury before realizing it was not physical pain that was plaguing John. Another sob wraps his body, ragged and gut deep. Tears carve salty tracks down the brunette's handsome face.

“Ah- hell John.” Gale bites out. He grips the back of John's neck, feels him shake and shudder with sobs and holds him tighter. It had always been this way. John burning bright and fast and emotional and Gale keeping him from blazing himself out.

“I didn’t think I would make it out Gale,” John bites out. Somewhere along the way they had ceased to be Buck and Bucky the Pilots. Now just Gale and John, two boys surviving a war in the cockpit of an airplane. “I didn’t really want to anymore.”

“But you did. You survived it all”

“Survived.” Scoffs John “now ain’t that just the bare minimum.”

Gale's thumb presses under the sharp corner of John's jaw, pushes against the pulse point hammering away, sharp and desperate. His own face is wet, sticky and too tight from salt that dries between each

tear. “I was so scared they shot you for helpin’ us escape.” he whispers “thought I got ya killed by my own damn cowardice.”

John shakes his head, sniffles and wipes ineffectively at his drenched face “I told you to run.”

“I ain’t never run in my life John Egan. Not till you told me to.” John laughs wetly and Gale shakes him a bit. “They punish you? When we left?”

As if they had gone for a stroll, as if Neithammer hadn’t been bayoneted to death but a teenager in a middle of nowhere forest.

Gale feels his companion tense under his hands, shaking his head in a sharp motion, “Bubs stopped ‘em from shooting me outright. They were damn furious though.”

“They beat you.” It was written all over John's body. Not in scars and bruises, but in the way he carried himself like a stray dog that had taken one too many kicks. He hadn’t been that way on the march. Tired and angry sure, still a dog, yes. But not one cowed.

John grips the leather of the yoke in front of him, gripping it white-knuckled as if he could snap the metal and leather off at the base. “Of a sorts.”

There were things no man could speak of on his captivity.

Gale takes John's hand, brings the scarred knuckles to his mouth and holds it there, turns their hands over til he can place his lips to the pulse point at John’s wrist. It’s not a kiss, there’s no press or pursing of lips, but tender nevertheless, intimate in a way that makes Gale shudder. Cautious of whether John will even allow this.

“I ain’t prayed in a long time,” Gale says whisper-soft. He feels John’s pulse skip a beat, “but I prayed every day you were safe and alive and coming back to me. Every morning, and every night.” He lets himself cry again, tears hidden against the scarred skin of John's hand.

“You may not have wanted to survive it John. But you did. We both did. Just as we said. The only things we got left is to go home.”

“And then what?” John's voice was so ragged, so tragic it opens a pit in Gale's own belly.

I don’t know.

It’s dark out now, so nobody sees the way John disentangles his hand from Gales, the way he cups Gale’s cheek just as he’d done a dozen times before and wipes the tears away with a long finger.

“I thought you didn’t cry.”

“I don’t.”

John smiles, barely more than a flash of teeth “So you don’t cry, and you don’t run except when I tell you to. What do you do, Gale Cleven?”

“Why, keep you out of trouble Major.” His voice barely shakes and wobbles, piecing himself back together under John’s touch.

John nods, smiling faintly and gazing out over the blackened airfield, lips curving as he strokes the arch of Gales cheekbone tenderly “Mind if you keep doing that a while longer?”

“I could be convinced.”

End Notes

So this is not edited and written in one session but oh my god this incredibly mid tv show has captured my whole attention all because Austin Butler plays it like a stupid romance. Please enjoy this drabble. might do one from Bucky's perspective next

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